

Veterans' Healthy Living

VA NEW ENGLAND HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

WINTER 2004–2005

**Surviving cold
and flu season**

**Put your sleep
problems to bed**

Avoiding a stroke



MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



Jeannette Chirico-Post, M.D.

The VA New England Healthcare System is proud of the many accomplishments in the Network that demonstrate our commitment to serve our veterans through excellence in health care, education and research.

At present, we are a leader among Networks on performance measure achievement, with 70 percent of performance measures in the Fully Successful and Exceptional range. Overall inpatient and outpatient satisfaction scores are in the Exceptional range. On quality of care measures, Network 1 has demonstrated progressive and consistent improvement in the areas of disease prevention, chronic disease management and use of nationally accepted clinical practice guidelines. As we look ahead to 2005, the Network will continue to emphasize the delivery of outstanding health care services to the veterans of New England.

Network 1 recently held its second annual educational conference on leadership. The focus of the conference was to highlight programs and services implemented to improve access, efficiency and quality of care. These programs and services will enable the Network to successfully achieve the top four strategic goals: coordination of care, integration of specialty and acute care, fiscal solvency and the advancement of mental health.

I am proud to inform you that the White River Junction (WRJ) VA Medical Center is the recipient of the 2004 Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert W. Carey Trophy Award for Organizational Excellence. This award is the highest quality award the Department of Veterans Affairs can bestow. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi presented the trophy to WRJ at an awards ceremony in Washington, D.C., in September 2004. The award recognizes VA organizations that have excelled in organizational effectiveness and performance. This is the third consecutive year the WRJ facility received a Carey achievement award. I am pleased to announce that Network 1 submitted an application for the 2004 VHA Quality Achievement Recognition Grant. Feedback from the application will help us build on our strengths and prioritize areas for improvement as we continue our quality journey.

We value feedback from our readers. The articles included in our newsletters have been in direct response to your requests for specific health topics. To ensure that we continue to meet your needs, we would like to know the topics you would most like to see in the newsletters. Please take a few minutes to fill out the comment card in this issue. Mail it back to us, and it will automatically be entered into a drawing for a \$50 VA Canteen gift certificate.

Finally, this issue of *Veterans' Healthy Living* includes articles on preventing stroke, managing sleep disorders and surviving cold and flu season. We hope you find them informative.

Best wishes for a happy, healthy and prosperous new year!

Sincerely,

Jeannette Chirico-Post, M.D.
Network Director

Editor's note: Page 6 of the Summer 2004 issue of *Veterans' Healthy Living* included the recommendation for colon cancer screening, "a fecal occult blood test every year, a sigmoidoscopy every five years and a colonoscopy every 10 years for people 50 and older." However, it is recommended that patients have *one* of these three tests done. At this time, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force found good evidence that fecal occult blood testing (FOBT) reduces mortality from colorectal cancer, and that is the approach the doctors in the VA New England Healthcare System recommend for screening. In some patients, screening after the age of 80 may not be indicated. Fecal occult blood tests have saved many lives, and we encourage all patients to complete the test when given the cards by their doctors.

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Visit us on the Web at
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Avoiding a stroke:

What you can do

Stroke is the third-leading cause of death in our country, yet four in 10 adults can't name a single stroke symptom. "The real tragedy is that most strokes could have been prevented if those at risk were identified and treated in time," said Lawrence Brass, M.D., chief of Neurology at the VA Connecticut Healthcare System and chair of the Executive Committee for VA's Stroke Quality Evaluation and Research Initiative (QUERI).

Some risk factors are beyond your control, such as being over 55 or having a personal or family history of stroke. If you're female and over 55, you're more likely than a man to die of stroke. If you're African-American, your risk for stroke doubles.

Yet, you *can* control other risk factors by making these lifestyle changes:

■ **Have regular checkups.**

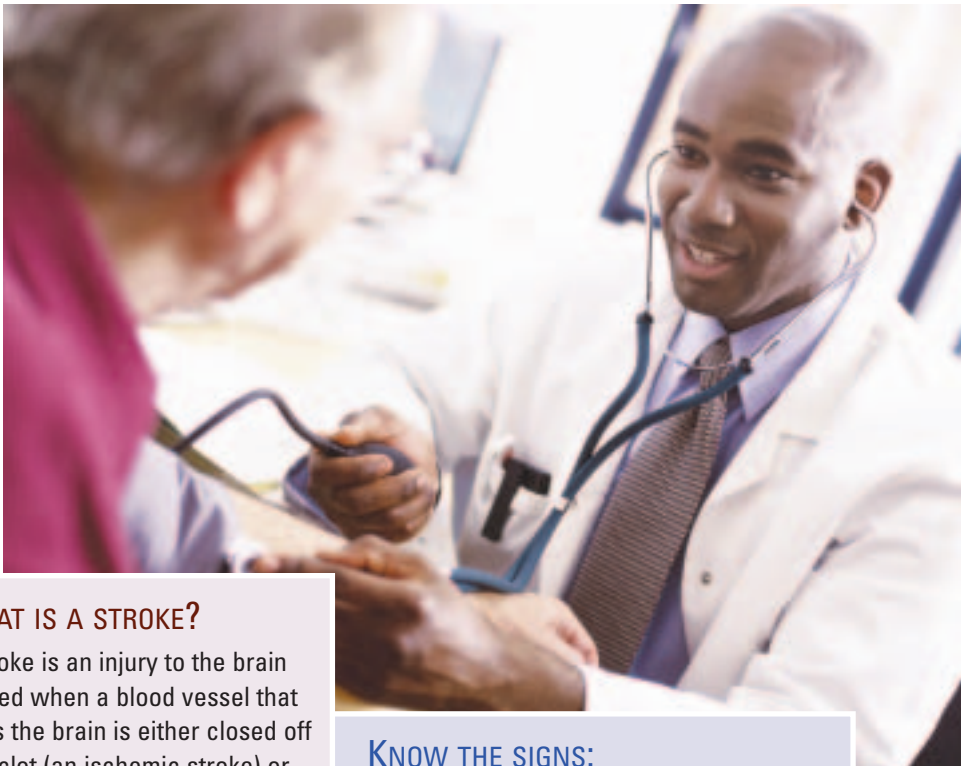
Your doctor will monitor your risk factors and also may prescribe medications to help lower your cholesterol or prevent your blood from clotting.

■ **Lose weight.** Being overweight or obese contributes to conditions that cause coronary disease, diabetes and stroke.

■ **Change your diet.** A brain-protective eating plan typically includes less fat and cholesterol and more fish, poultry, fiber-rich whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

■ **Lower your salt intake.** Keep your daily sodium (salt) intake below 2,400 milligrams to control blood pressure.

■ **Exercise regularly.** Jogging, power walking and bicycling strengthen the heart muscle, control weight and reduce blood pressure. Check with your doctor before starting an exercise program.



WHAT IS A STROKE?

A stroke is an injury to the brain caused when a blood vessel that feeds the brain is either closed off by a clot (an ischemic stroke) or bursts (a hemorrhagic stroke). If deprived of its oxygen-rich blood supply even for just a few minutes, the brain may become injured, and a portion of it may die.

KNOW THE SIGNS:

If you or a loved one suffers any of these stroke symptoms, dial 911 immediately:

- sudden numbness or weakness on one side of the body
- sudden blindness or dimmed vision in one or both eyes
- sudden "thunderclap" headache—the worst headache you've ever had
- sudden trouble speaking or understanding what's being said
- sudden difficulty with balance or steadiness

■ **Quit smoking.** Stopping now is the single best change you can make for your health.

"The most important things you can do to prevent a stroke are to talk to your doctor, know your risks and understand what you can do to treat your risk factors," said Dr. Brass. The VA offers excellent programs to identify and control risk factors. For more information, contact your primary care provider.



TYPES OF SLEEP DISORDERS

Here are some common sleep disorders:

- **Obstructive sleep apnea.** If you have this disorder, an obstructed airway causes you to snore loudly or gasp or choke for breath during sleep. According to Daniel Gottlieb, M.D., director of the Sleep Disorders Center at the VA Boston Healthcare System, "At least one in 15 adults are likely to have moderate or severe obstructive sleep apnea." Sleep apnea may cause extreme fatigue and daytime sleepiness. Left untreated, it may contribute to high blood pressure and increase your risk of diabetes, heart attack and stroke.
- **Insomnia.** Having persistent trouble falling or staying asleep? You may have insomnia. Over time, lack of sound sleep may lead to a reduced ability to concentrate, depression, memory loss and greater risk of illness.
- **Restless legs syndrome (RLS).** If you suffer from RLS, you have an irresistible urge to move your legs, often accompanied by tingling or crawling sensations in them. RLS most often occurs during the evening or when you're trying to sleep.
- **Periodic limb movement disorder.** With this

condition, your leg muscles contract involuntarily during sleep. The contractions cause jerking and partial awakening.

See your primary care provider if you suspect you have any of these sleep disorders. "If you're overly sleepy during the day despite getting seven to eight hours of sleep a night, that should be a red flag that you may have a sleep disorder," said Dr. Gottlieb.

A physician trained in sleep medicine can evaluate you and, if necessary, recommend treatment to help you sleep better. In some cases, an overnight sleep study will be needed to diagnose your sleep problem.

Rise and shine! Put your sleep problems to bed

We've been told for years we should sleep eight hours a night, but few of us do. Nearly 70 million Americans suffer from sleep disorders such as sleep apnea and insomnia. Yet too often, people don't recognize the severity of their conditions or know where to turn for help.

POOR SLEEP, POOR HEALTH

Chronic lack of sleep not only affects your energy level and mood but also weakens your immune system. Poor sleep limits your physical ability, speeds up your aging process and affects your body's ability to regulate glucose and insulin, which may lead to obesity and diabetes. Lack of sleep may also contribute to mistakes on the job and strained relationships at home.

CALL YOUR DOCTOR IF...

- You snore loudly, choke or appear to stop breathing for brief periods while sleeping. This could be a sign of sleep apnea.
- You have insomnia that lasts more than a month.
- Extreme tiredness is affecting your daily activities.





Left: Ann Hibbert, a registered polysomnographic technologist and Sleep Lab coordinator at the VA Boston Healthcare System, scores a sleep study for many variables before the sleep physicians review and interpret it.

Right: Theresa Banks, a polysomnographic technologist and registered respiratory therapist at the Sleep Lab at the VA Boston Healthcare System, prepares veteran Francis O'Connor for his sleep study.

SLEEP-TIGHT TIPS

Getting more, or better, sleep takes some conscious lifestyle changes, but it can be done. These tips may help you rest easy:

- Keep to a regular sleep schedule, going to bed and rising in the morning at the same time each day.
- Develop a relaxing nightly ritual such as reading, listening to music or taking a bath.
- Create an environment conducive to sleep—make it quiet, dark, cool and comfortable.
- Abstain from alcohol, caffeine and cigarettes at least two to three hours before bedtime.

- Exercise regularly, but no later than three hours before bedtime.
- Avoid too much food or drink before bedtime to reduce night waking from heartburn, indigestion or trips to the bathroom.
- If you can't fall asleep within 20 minutes of lights-out, get out of bed and do a relaxing activity such as reading or listening to soft music until you feel sleepy.

To learn more about sleep problems and disorders, visit the National Sleep Foundation Web site at www.sleepfoundation.org.

APPLE RHUBARB CRISP

Filling

- 2 cups fresh or frozen unsweetened sliced rhubarb, thawed and drained (about 10 oz. fresh or 16 oz. frozen)
- 2 medium cooking apples, cored, peeled and sliced (about 2 cups)
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 Tbsp. cornstarch

Topping

- 2/3 cup regular or quick-cooking rolled oats
- 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/4 cup firmly packed light brown sugar
- 3 1/2 Tbsp. light margarine

In a large bowl, combine the filling ingredients. Stir to mix well. Let stand for 1 hour. Spoon into an ungreased 8x8x2-inch baking pan or a 1-quart casserole dish.

Preheat oven to 375° F. In a medium bowl, stir together the topping ingredients except the margarine. Using a pastry blender, cut in margarine until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Sprinkle topping over rhubarb mixture.

Bake uncovered for 30 to 40 minutes, or until topping is light brown. Let cool for about 20 minutes before serving.

Serves 6. Each serving provides 236 calories, 3 g protein, 49 g carbohydrate, 4 g total fat (1 g saturated, 1 g polyunsaturated, 2 g monounsaturated), 0 mg cholesterol and 87 mg sodium.



Recipe adapted with permission from The American Heart Association Low-Fat, Low-Cholesterol Cookbook, 2nd edition. ©1997. Published by Clarkson/Potter Publishers, a division of Random House, Inc. Available from booksellers everywhere.

Surviving cold and flu season

If you're like most Americans, expect to get as many as four colds this winter. A cold may seem like a harmless malady, but it can lead to more serious infections such as sinusitis, pneumonia or influenza (the flu). The flu causes more than 36,000 deaths in the United States each year.

CONQUERING COLDS

A cold is a viral infection of the upper-respiratory tract. Symptoms include a runny nose, sore throat, mild headaches or body aches, sneezing, coughing and fever (less than 101°). "Antibiotics won't help the common cold, but frequent hand washing helps prevent the spread of viruses that cause colds," said Richard Martinello, M.D., chief, Hospital Epidemiology and Infection Control at the VA Connecticut Healthcare System. Over-the-counter medications may provide relief. See your doctor if your cold doesn't get better within seven to 10 days, your symptoms worsen or you have a chronic respiratory condition.

FIGHTING THE FLU

The flu is a viral infection of the nose, throat and lungs. It usually causes body aches, headaches, cough and high fever. The best way to fend off the flu is to get vaccinated. Due to this season's influenza vaccine shortage, the Department of Veterans Affairs is following the current Centers for Disease Control (CDC) flu vaccination guidelines, which ensure that high-risk health care staff and enrolled veteran patients get flu shots:

- people 65 and older
- people who have chronic lung, heart or metabolic diseases (including diabetes); kidney diseases; blood disorders (such as sickle cell anemia); or weakened immune



systems, including people who have HIV/AIDS

- pregnant women
- residents of nursing homes and other chronic-care facilities, inpatient geriatric psychiatry units and spinal cord injury units
- health care workers who provide face-to-face care to patients

In addition to the vaccine, preventive steps can stop the flu bug from spreading. Avoid close contact with people who are sick. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, then dispose of the tissue. Wash your hands after you cough or sneeze. If you do get the flu, stay home from work and avoid running errands.

Talk to your doctor right away if you think you have the flu. Some prescribed medications may help, but you need to start them immediately. For more information about the flu and this year's recommendations, visit the VA's Public Health Web site at www.publichealth.va.gov or the CDC's Web site at www.cdc.gov/flu.

HAND WASHING 101



Wet your hands with warm running water and apply liquid or clean bar soap. Lather well and rub your hands together vigorously for at least 10 to 15 seconds.

Scrub your wrists, the backs of your hands, between your fingers and under your fingernails. Rinse well and dry with a clean or disposable towel.

VISN 1 reaches out to returning combat veterans

The VA New England Healthcare System recognizes the importance of meeting the needs of our newest generation of veterans—the courageous men and women returning home from Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. Whether these veterans need assistance in their transition from the military health care system into the VA or advice on benefits, VISN 1 staff are here to provide service.

A Web page dedicated to providing information on Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom is featured on the VISN 1 Internet site. The page contains points of contact and phone numbers for each medical center along with Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) contacts. Information is provided on services and related VBA and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) links. More information can be found on the VISN 1 Internet site at www.visn1.med.va.gov/freedom/.



Mark E. Gratton Jr. (right), U.S. Army veteran from Milton, Vt., receives an ophthalmic examination with dilation from Dr. Vincent DeVita, O.D., optometrist at White River Junction VAMC. Mr. Gratton was wounded in a roadside explosion in Baghdad and was awarded

the Purple Heart Medal. He was nearly blinded and has undergone several surgeries to remove glass pieces from his eyes.

Vioxx questions & answers

*Sampath Narayana, R.Ph.
VISN 1 Pharmacy Benefits Manager*

On September 30, 2004, the drug company Merck announced a voluntary withdrawal of Vioxx®—a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID)—after a new study showed that chronic use of the drug may cause an increased risk for cardiovascular events such as heart attack and stroke. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) plans to work closely with Merck to coordinate the withdrawal of Vioxx from the U.S. market. Here are answers to some questions you may have about this new finding.

1. What is Vioxx?

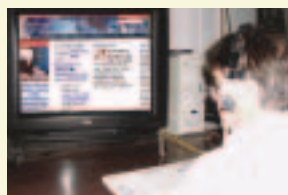
A. Vioxx (rofecoxib) is a prescription medicine used to relieve signs and symptoms of arthritis, acute pain in adults and painful menstrual cycles.

2. What should I do if I am currently taking Vioxx?

A. The risk of suffering a heart attack or stroke from Vioxx is very small, but we encourage people taking Vioxx to contact their physicians to discuss possibly replacing it with an alternative treatment. Decisions about which drug product to take to treat your symptoms should be made in consultation with your physician based on your specific treatment needs.

3. Where can I get more information?

A. You can get more information by visiting www.merck.com and www.vioxx.com or by calling 1-888-36VIOXX (1-888-368-4699).



Veteran Bob Blais of Woburn, Mass., uses a hands-free computer to access his health record on the My Health Vet Web site.

My Health Vet Phase II: Now on the Web

Phase II of My Health Vet, a Web-based application designed specifically for veterans and their families, is now available on the Web. Veterans may review drug, health and disease information; record and track personal health readings like blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol and weight;

and add information to their health record like new allergies, over-the-counter medications and medical events. Future features will allow veterans to refill prescriptions online and view appointments and co-payment information. Visit My Health Vet at www.myhealth.va.gov/.

Thanks to the Veterans Canteen Service

VISN 1 is grateful for the generosity of the Veterans Canteen Service (VCS) for sponsoring the \$50 gift certificate for the comment card drawing. The VCS is the VA's system of food courts and retail stores. Its goal is to provide quality, service and value and ensure a positive shopping or dining experience.

Where to find us



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